



TOLERANCE AND RESISTANCE: WOMEN IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is one of the pioneering works that announce a tone of tolerance and resistance against local and global inequities in India. In this novel the predicament of Indian women is studied in depth along with the plight of dalits (untouchables), lower class people, racial subalterns juxtaposed against the global capitalism and neo-imperialism clad in globalization. The author sees the resistance against gender oppression to be leading towards class oppression and spurring on anti-colonial thought and action. In the novel the portrayal the marital and inter-gender relations of Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel epitomize the resistant rebellion to an extent. The trespassing of these characters outside the boundaries of the institution of marriage as practiced in post-colonial India, and the "Love laws" that predate Western colonialism lead to a scathing interrogation of the basic values and structures of the post-colonial Indian society.

The portrayal of Ammu is a striking case in point. Ammu is gets attracted to the untouchable labourer Velutha and violates the "Love Laws" which her community has inherited from their Hindu past. Her transgression of the caste, class and religious boundaries mounts a rebellion of a kind against her marginalization as a woman.

"Ammu's rebellion against maternal and marital conventionality, and finally, her liaison with dark-skinned and untouchable Velutha (ironically meaning white) constitutes a violation against a determinate social order,



sponsoring the immutable “love laws”. Her rebellion or her “quest for self-identity”, as Tirthankar Chanda points out is “an attempt at repossessing, renaming, reknowing the world”, but it “appears doomed from the very beginning because of the nature of the society where she has had to seek refuge with her twins after her divorce and also because of the incapacity of her kin (mother, great-aunt Kochamma) to provide an adequate model for redefining the Self” (Chanda 1997:40)” Ammu is presented as a victim of the institution of marriage. But she rebels against such social structures and challenges marriage as an institution for a disciplined life.

Though her personality is locked up she is an icon of resistance. She dies exiled. But before her acceptance of such fate, in desperate attempts of self-realization, she becomes a symbolic personification of all subalterns, especially women, who challenge power structures of the social order. Murari Prasad writes: “At the heart of Roy’s astounding book is the conflict between the characters excluded from institutional power and their hegemonic counterparts...Bose points out that Ammu’s conscious decision to embrace Velutha is a forbidden cross-caste liaison of radical significance within the novel’s given social imperatives... Bose links these violations to Roy’s robust commitment to the autonomy of the self-the freedom of small things. Thus the feminist reconceptualization of politics in Roy’s novel, as Bose notes, is profoundly subversive.” (2006, p.21)

Khurshid Alam in his article “Untouchables” in *The God of Small Things* situates Ammu vis-à-vis Velutha and clarifies the role of Ammu: “Roy expresses her disillusionment with the social conditions of the postcolonial world in which the untouchables of the past still face a hostile society that does not let them live as free and independent individuals. Velutha, the God of small things, the outcast can never co-exist peacefully



with the “touchable” communities for as long as the stigma of untouchability is attached to him and countless others like him. Ammu, another “untouchable” within the “touchable” cannot pursue happiness because doing so threatens the existing order, and the society takes every possible step to stop change.”

In the pages of the novel we see the colonial ruler’s authority is challenged by a subaltern woman who is economically and socially marginalized. Smothered by social injustice, Ammu rebels against the very social norms that constitute the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. This rebellion is an act of resistance against the very foundations of this society. Her most significant act of becoming sexually involved with the “Untouchable”, lower class Velutha, cannot be taken at its face value as an act of sexual transgression only. This is an act of resistance aimed at bringing about change in and around her. That is why she goes to the police station and argues against the detention of this lower caste, lower class subaltern, denying supposed “womanly” qualities typical of an Indian woman.

Mammachi is the second important female character who puts up a kind of resistance against patriarchal oppression and marginalizing apparatuses. She is the mother of Ammu and Chacko. Mammachi is also a physically and psychologically abused wife alike so many women in different societies who undergo torture and trauma and never speak out. Roy situates Mammachi in a strategically significant position between the caste, class and gender-subalterns and the feudal-capitalist patriarchal social structures that are inflicted with age-old complexities. She is not only a passive victim but is also the target of the jealousy of her husband. Mammachi is also denied help from her husband, the supreme patriarch in the family, although she is practically blind.



Binayak Roy in his article "The Title of *The God of Small Things*: A Subversive Salvo" comments on her thus: "Mammachi is another Big Woman who deifies her son Chacko and despises her daughter Ammu. When Chacko stops Pappachi's beating of Mammachi, his action has unexpected consequences: "From then onwards he became the repository of all [Mammachi's] womanly feelings. Her Man. Her only Love" (168) In the presence of Chacko's British wife Margaret, Ammu perceives with womanly instinct "the undercurrent of sexual jealousy that emanated from Mammachi" (329)" (2009)

As a post-colonial Indian woman she succumbs to the lures of pre-colonial caste rules and "Love laws" and at the same time tries to be in an interrogative mode regarding both the colonial past as well as the neo-colonial present in her interactions with her daughter Ammu. Mammachi's daughter Ammu resists patriarchy and caste and class bigotry in public and pays with her life. Obviously, the web of neo-imperialism masquerading as globalization supports such social structures in place. Mammachi, however, is not totally complicit in social injustice. She continues to hold on to her dominating role falsifying the idea that women should only obey orders.

As a post-colonial Indian woman she is driven by the pulls of pre-colonial tradition, the desire for freedom and equality born at least partially as a result of India's encounter with the West and the neo-colonial present which connects the local inequalities of caste, class and gender with the global ones of an unequal and grossly unjust economic and political order epitomized on a micro-scale by a character like Chacko. Although, Mammachi succumbs to the pulls of these forces we retain sympathy for her for the depredations she had to suffer in life and the "resilience" of her character. Mammachi's acquiescence in many patriarchal values are a defensive gesture rather than an honest agreement with hegemonic powers. As resistance can



be passive or active, public or subterranean, unequivocal or ambivalent, she should be allowed the status of being in the circle of resistance.

Brinda Bose in her article titled, "Eroticism as Politics in *The God of Small Things*" deals with the transgressive love of Ammu for Velutha and comments that "sociological studies have repeatedly proven that the idea that love and desire are elitist indulgences is a myth" (2006, p. 97). Mammachi and Baby Kochamma apparently seem to submit without any hesitation to patriarchal social norms as pointed out by Antonio Navarro-Tejero in her article titled, "Power Relationships in *The God of Small Things*": "The first generation of women in the novel give extreme importance to patriarchal social norms, indeed they succumb to them...." (2006, p. 105).

Coming to the next generation, the zygotic twins Estha and Rahel are subalterns in the sense of being rootless economically, financially, in terms of family, lineage and culture. Being deprived of a "normal" nuclear family, fatherly love and a stable economic base, these two children have to fall back upon each other most of the time. Estha and Rahel do not come from poor background. They had a bourgeois background. But when their parents get divorced, they are subjected to adversity. They, along with their mother were unwanted in their grandmother's place.

So, Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel, four women in *The God of Small Things*, interrogate pre-colonial/indigenous norms, customs, laws, values and structures connected with patriarchy, class, caste and feudal-capitalist economic structures. These women also interrogate, through all their actions, the "Love laws". But, interestingly enough, these women do not advocate for the forces of global inequality masquerading as globalization. Ammu refuses to prostitute herself to the white boss of her husband. Mammachi feels threatened by whatever happens on the television. Baby Kochamma, though affected by globalization, does not accept every change



in the identity of Father Mulligan. She accepts Roman Catholicism for his sake, but does not change over to Hinduism, when Father Mulligan, becomes a Hindu Sadhu, echoing the effects of movements like Hare Krishna in the West. Rahel on her part awaits the arrival of her twin brother Estha and tries to heal him of his dumbness and fractured existence and consummates their childish but incestuous love transgressing along with the "Love laws". This act is a total denial of the restrictive permissive sexuality of the West that ties sexuality with business, transaction and money. Thus, Rahel also seems to interrogate the global inequalities and hegemony masquerading as global connectivity or globalization.

Generally considered a kind of a feminist, the author does not focus on the question of women severed from other subalterns. Roy's treatment of the issues of women in her fiction, again, is different from her examination of the state of women in her non-fictional writings. In her novel the women are represented as subalterns at par with the untouchable Velutha and the children Rahel and Estha. In her non-fictional writings, Roy deals with specific issues and comments sparsely in a theoretical mode about their interrelationship. The complexity of texture, allusiveness, Joycean stream of consciousness, and intertextuality make the novel a much more articulate though ambiguous document about the subalterns in post-colonial India, including its women than many of her non-fictional writings.

The novel does not provide or show any blueprint for the women to be emancipated from the three kinds of oppression of caste, class and gender. All women are also not equally affected by these three kinds of repressive regimes. While we do agree that there are definite similarities between the insights of the Subaltern Studies Project and the views of Arundhati Roy, we have to keep in mind that while the members of the Subaltern Studies Collective were/are theoretically informed historians, sociologists, and



people of similar academic backgrounds; Roy is primarily a writer, writing for an inchoate readership, as well as a committed activist.

The God of Small Things, presents women as subalterns, some of whom try to bring about change through resistance. But as subalterns they do not have the articulate voice that members of other groups in Indian society have. These women mount resistance against both local and global inequalities, though the first kind of resistance is perhaps stronger. Through their trajectories of personal involvement in different issues they interrogate the structures of caste, class and gender, implicitly and explicitly, unconsciously and consciously, partially or tangentially and wholeheartedly. These women are different and similar, complicit in oppressions as well as mounting frontal attacks against iniquitous social structures, customs and laws. All of the women discussed do not fit into the way things are in post-colonial India, plagued by indigenous kinds of injustice and neo-colonialism masquerading as global connectivity or globalization.

The insights of the Subaltern Studies Project are useful in understanding the complexity of their conditions, but not fully. We do not see a one to one correspondence between those insights and the non-discursive intuitions of the novelist, Roy. A thorough consideration of Roy's presentation of women in all her works, both fictional and non-fictional, in tandem with the works of multiple authors from the Subaltern Studies Project and its admirers and detractors can fully or adequately throw light on the four women characters we have dealt with and the question of what Roy considers the proper way for the emancipation of post-colonial Indian women.



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